

How Free is the Press

That without a free press there can be no free people is a thing that all free people take for granted, we need not discuss it. Nor will we at this moment discuss the restrictions placed upon the press in time of war. At such times all liberties have to be restricted, free people must see to it that when peace comes full freedom is restored in the meantime, it may be wholesome to consider what that freedom is, and how far it is truly desirable. It may turn out to be no freedom at all, or even a more freedom to tyrannies, for tyranny is fact, the uncontrolled freedom of one man, or one gang, to impose its will on the world. When we speak of the freedom of the press, we usually mean freedom in a very technical and restricted sense—namely, freedom from direction or censorship by the government. In this respect, the British press is under ordinary conditions. Singularly free. It can attack the policy and political character of ministers, interfere in the delicate machinery of foreign diplomacy, conduct campaigns to subject the constitution, incite citizens to discontent and rebellion, expose scandals and foment grievance, and generally harry and behave the servants of the state. With almost perfect liberty on occasion, it can become a weapon to coerce the government to conform to what it asserts to be the will of the people.

So far, this is all to the good. Occasionally, this freedom may produce disastrous hesitations and inconsistencies in public policy, or tend to hamper the swift execution of emergency measures, but generally speaking it works to secure and sustain that central doctrine of Democracy as we understand it—that the state is not the master but the servant of the people.

The press as a whole, and in technical and restricted sense, is thus free in a peaceful Britain. There is no shade of political opinion that does not somehow contrive to express itself. But if we go on to imagine that any particular organ of the press enjoys the larger liberty of being a forum of public opinion

opinion, we are gravely mistaken. Every Newspaper is shackled to its own set of overloads and in its turn, like the unmerciful servant, exercise a powerful bondage upon its readers and one the public generally indeed we may say that the heaviest restriction upon the freedom of public opinion is not the official censorship of the press but the unofficial censorship by a press which exists not so much to express opinion as to manufacture it.